Howard Phillips Lovecraft

. . . and as interpreted in his favorite costume by the artist, Virgil Finlay.

H. P. Lovecraft: A Pupil's View

A STRIKING, but typical phenomenon in American letters during the past two decades has been the swift—and posthumous—rise of Howard Phillips Lovecraft, who, from an obscure revisionist and occasional contributor to pulp magazines at his death in 1937 has grown to a position not far removed from that of Edgar Allan Poe or Ambrose Bierce in the canon of macabre literature in America.

During the last years of his lifetime, Lovecraft was already the spiritual father of a group of devoted followers, most of them, like him, minor writers who were interested in special fiction, and who not only borrowed from his literary myth patterns at his urging, but frequently added something of their own which was, in turn, adopted by Lovecraft into his weird tales; these included such writers as Clark Ashton Smith, August Derleth, Robert Bloch, Henry Kuttner, Frank Belknap Long, and the late Robert E. Howard. To emphasize even more a parallel with Poe, it was only after Lovecraft's death that popularity and international reputation came to him so that, though his readers at his death numbered only in the thousands, today they have reached the millions with widespread publication in America, the British Commonwealth, France, Italy, Spain, and other countries.

Book marts and musty basements are haunted by collectors of Lovecraftiana, and one volume of his collected stories, if and when obtainable, brings from sixty to a hundred dollars a copy. Yet *The Outsider and Others* was published only so recently as 1939. A second collection, containing work of his followers as well, commands almost as much; yet *Beyond the Wall of Sleep* is just ten years old at this writing. And magazines containing his work command equally high premiums, in proportion.

It is well known that this gentleman of the night, this second master of the macabre supported himself primarily by acting as a writers' in-

structor. He coached not only amateurs but many already established writers as well, often revising submitted manuscripts in their entirety.

Some of Lovecraft's friends remonstrated with him and regretted that he spent so much time as a revisionist. There is no evidence, however, that Lovecraft chafed at this means of making an extremely meagre living. He was generous with his astounding sapience and derived a genuine sense of pleasure and satisfaction out of giving his wisdom and erudition to help others.

As an instructor in the technique of terror fiction he wrote copious notes and footnotes for his pupils or protégés and sometimes revised the entire manuscript to suit himself. Often, because of his frugality with limited funds, he would reply to letters by writing on the back of them in his Victorian script.

The pupils and friends who benefited from Lovecraft's painstaking guidance are many and scattered over a vast area. My own experience with his instruction is doubtless typical of the relations which maintained between Lovecraft and eleven of his pupils.

Though I was primarily interested in journalism, I was already qualified as a court reporter and selling short stories and articles as a means of supporting myself and young son while furthering my education in Journalism at Columbia University. Like all ambitious amateur writers, I felt uncertain, incapable of walking in the same class with professionals, and was ever seeking the advice and criticism of more successful and capable writers and reporters.

Book stores are food and drink to the author. It was in 1928 in a small book store in Cleveland that I first learned of Lovecraft. The bookstore was managed by Samuel Loveman, a bibliophile and writer of verse who had achieved some minor fame as a friend of the poet, Hart Crane. Loveman was among those who made up the Kalem Klub, composed of enthusiasts for the weird and unusual fiction and centered around H. P. Lovecraft. Bookstore proprietors are always being asked by amateurs to recommend publishers, teachers and critics. I was no exception. At my inquiry, in the course of our conversation, Mr Loveman told me about Lovecraft.

"Write to him," he advised. "He can help you, if anyone can." He scribbled on a card and handed it to me.

H. P. Lovecraft
10 Barnes Street
Providence, Rhode Island.

I wrote to Lovecraft and he replied immediately that he would be glad to examine any of my work I cared to send and offer what assistance he could.

Thereafter I became an established recipient of the famous Lovecraft letters. He wrote regularly, sometimes fifty and sixty page letters, in a fine spidery script which often counted five hundred words to the page. These letters were filled with the strictest rules of rhetoric and meaty literary advice.

In spite of my English and literary background, my first assignment was *Parker's Aid to Composition*. Lovecraft sent me an old copy which he had picked up in a New York second-hand bookstore for ten cents. He instructed me to study and learn this text book "from cover to cover, backward and forward." The old book is a treasured possession in my library today.

Lovecraft was, first, last and always an antiquarian. Literally speaking he was born an old man, and was of the eighteenth century in both mind and body. He was possessed of a nineteenth century Anglomania and insisted upon the classical spelling of most simplified American words. He preferred older forms of spelling such as "connexion" or English forms such as "neighbour" and "labour". He always spoke of himself as "your humble and obedient servant"—"the old gentleman from Providence Plantation" or "grandpa". His passion for everything old and historic went back to prehistoric man. Not only was he a student of Aztec mythology, but he had an astounding knowledge of the Bantu race and the Azmazulus, more frequently called or referred to as the Zulus. He was well versed in the language of the Kaffirs, Damoras, Swahili and the Chulu and Zani—who are extremely tenacious of their ancient religion.

His idiosyncrasies were often curiously interwoven with his personality and his way of life. He was interested in the origin and folklore of human beliefs and customs, and collected the *Old Farmer's Almanac* to trace the growth of old superstitions which were so often printed in its pages. His love of cats was one with his delight in dark, eerie things, yet he wove beauty and poetry into all manner of the darkest terrors and most spectral settings. Though the morbid gave him a special sort of pleasure, he was not without a fine sense of humor, often subtly conveyed; he might easily have been the unchallenged master of the macabre had he lived another decade or two.

Like Poe, he lived for the night, but he was sensitive to the beauty of spring, to the sunlight and especially the warmth of summer, when he traveled to the woods to write and revise. Lovecraft was definitely a ruralist, a true provincial gentleman. Once, at the insistence of friends, he tried living in New York City, but its hustling activity destroyed his creative drive, and he fled to Providence to remain for the rest of his life, except for short trips to antiquarian towns. Possibly his only extravagance was the post-cards which he showered upon his friends; these were invariably of historical or architectural interest. He had a phenomenal memory for dates, names and faces; he was particularly interested in the faces of old women, in grotesque countenances, in the doorways and gambrel roofs of old buildings.

As a writer and instructor in the field of supernatural fiction, he was an undisputed master, and another's work seldom pleased him when first he saw it. He could always find much to improve, and he was generous with his advice, drawing on a vast store of knowledge quite beyond the capacity of the average man of education of his or our time. His letters of instructions were filled with delightful whimsy, reminiscences of travel, fascinating accounts of weird dreams and a fount of historical and literary erudition which few have the good fortune to learn in a lifetime let alone having the opportunity of being unselfishly tutored for years by such a master. He wrote as fluently in Greek and Latin as in English and when he began his strict instructions in Aztec Mythology he often wrote to me in Spanish.

Being young and romantic, I wanted to follow my own impulse for

fresh, youthful stories. Lovecraft was not convinced that his course was best. I was his protégé and he meant to bend my career to his direction.

"You must develop your creative ability—the ability of which I know you are capable," was Lovecraft's continuous refrain to me. He directed my reading toward Machen's *The Hill of Dreams* and Lord Dunsany. He urged my reading *Of Human Bondage*. "Only by reading this great novel *three* times can you appreciate its value to a young and beginning writer," he wrote.

He frowned upon most Victorian novels and cast aside anything that held the slightest touch of melodrama or insincerity. Briefly, I soon learned under this strict teaching that I dared not write contemporary love stories which would invite such criticism as: "No gentleman would dare kiss a girl in that fashion"; "No gentleman would think of knocking on a lady's bedroom door even at a houseparty." He gave this positive advice repeatedly: "You *must* cultivate your imagination. If you expect to reach a spot in the literary world, you must learn to think beyond superficialities."

I have carefully filed all his letters, post cards and instructions. Many letters were written in Latin and Greek, some of which were friendly and encouraging letters to my son while he was preparing for West Point. He gave him beneficial instructions in algebra, geometry, Latin and English in preparation for the Academy's entrance examination. There was no subject on which Lovecraft was not astoundingly learned. Had he lived even a short time longer, the acclaim which might have been his is incalculable.

On points of technique he was excellent. Exemplifying one of his rules, he wrote me, "Guard your transition, or places where the continuous action occur, where you change from describing a single scene in detail to gliding over a long period or vice versa, or where you shift the scene or point of view. Remember that it requires infinite care to make these transitions without a certain air of cumbrousness or amateurishness, and the best way to do it is to see, by careful and analytical reading of the best novels, *how others have done* it. This matter of transition is probably the most difficult single problem with which the beginner has to deal."

After a long period of endless work and steady and ruthless direction and criticism without selling, I grew restless and discouraged. I crushed down my own ambition and creative style to follow his advice. I dwarfed my inherent ability to please him.

The stories I sent him always came back so revised from their basic idea that I felt I was a complete failure as a writer. Disappointed and confused, I put aside everything that looked like a writer's tool and, with my son, set out for my sister's ranch in Oklahoma, a barren lonely place near the Texas border where blanket-wrapped Indians still roamed and lived in wigwams and rode bare-back, and with the nearest neighbors scattered and miles apart. From there I wrote Lovecraft that I would never make the grade as a writer—and, ironically, it was there that I really got started.

In reply to my cry of despair, Lovecraft became more the friend than the teacher. Each week I received friendly letters from him, always ending with a line or two about what other writers were doing. Gradually he began, only more firmly this time, with advice to develop my imagination rather than write stories with stock heroes and heroines. "Forget," he urged, "all about novels and short stories and authors and popular sentimentality. Think of nothing but real people and what they actually think and feel and say and experience. That is the way to write *literature* as opposed to the wearisome pap and patent bourgeois-fodder of the best-selling popular novelists. Be a Dreiser or a Mrs. Wharton—not a Harold Bell Wright or Fanny Hurst—and you can be one of these."

All this letter-writing took from Lovecraft's own creative work and took toll of his health, especially since his coaching fees were always meagre. But Lovecraft had convincing reason for his letter-writing. "My epistles," he once told a correspondent, "are another phase of my antiquarianism; for as you know, the art of letter-writing was assiduously cultivated in my favourite eighteenth century." Lovecraft, I was beginning to realize, had created an imaginary world for himself and actually lived as one in that era.

There in Oklahoma, doubting more and more that I would ever become a writer, let alone a successful one, I sat one evening with a

group of old Oklahoma settlers who had driven out to my sister's ranch. We sat around the kitchen fire and talked. Finally the conversation rambled on to folklore. Grandma Compton, my sister's mother-in-law, told a horror story about a couple who pioneered in Oklahoma not far from where we were. This story was a spark to me. I wrote a tale called *The Curse of Yig,* in which snakes figured, wove it around some of my Aztec knowledge instilled in me by Lovecraft, and sent it off to him. He was delighted with this trend toward realism and horror, and fairly showered me with letters and instructions.

Now at last I really went to work. I rewrote the story and together we revised and injected erudition into it about the Aztec Snake God, *Yig.* Finally, under his careful direction, I had a decent and I felt salable, weird-horror story. I was not too happy about the story and was fearful for any of my family to read it, lest they ostracize me for making such a tale out of the story Grandma Compton had told. But it was really fired with imagination and reality, and Lovecraft urged that it be sent out immediately.

Hesitantly I followed his advice. Out it went, not once but many times—until finally I shelved it with all the rejection slips, refusing to write anything else and wondering how many editors had shuddered over that story. Yet the gnawing urge within me kept on. But I wanted to write about things I knew—not drive myself to create tales of a fantastic world and people of which I knew nothing.

Lovecraft's next counsel to me was to take a writing course at Columbia, but even during that course he continued to be my mentor. I needed money, and what I aimed to do was to write fiction more to my liking. I began to wonder if Lovecraft's advice were not directing me away from salable fiction. Yet I had so far lost confidence in myself, that I hesitated to send out a manuscript without first having him see it. "Avoid anything savoring of the sentimental popular novel tradition," was his reiterated counsel. And I realize, now, he was undermining my self-confidence, my natural ability.

Ultimately, I was working on a novel which dealt with a Catholic upbringing. (I had been reared in a convent.) "Best of all," H. P. L. wrote me, "is your description of the Catholic school and the sense of

spaciousness, of colorful activity Deon (the heroine,) experiences in it—the nuns, the people, the girls come alive—are you thoroughly familiar with Catholic ritual and symbolism? You must never attempt to write about it extensively unless you are. A single error in nomenclature would seriously mar the story. The scenes in the school were colorful and arresting. . . . I have experienced considerable indecision as to whether I should comment with perfect candor on your recent work. Enthusiastic commendation is seldom a spur to creative endeavor and I was determined at first *not* to praise your work too heartily. But . . . well, I have read the enclosed opus twice and I really can't avoid commenting upon it! It is really great—it has elan. . . ."

A protégé of Lovecraft's, Frank Belknap Long, Jr., whom Lovecraft liked to call "Grandpa's Sonny Belknap", had also set up as tutor of writers, and under Lovecraft's direction I spent a long period advantageously under his tutelege. It was through him that I finally met Lovecraft in person.

During one of my visits to New York, Mrs. Long asked me to tea, telling me, "Howard will come over from Providence." Of course, I was curious to meet him. In our correspondence he had told me his age and various of his likings: "I wear only black ties. . . . I like only cats as pets." He had written about one very black kitten that played on his desk and pawed at his pen while he was writing, and about other casual descriptions that fired my desire to see what he was really like. I turned up early for the Longs' tea.

Promptly at two the buzzer sounded and Belknap sprang to open the door. A tall, gaunt, black-clad figure, carrying an oblong case, glided into the room like a shadow. The worn black bag seemed as much a part of him as a purse is to a woman. In it, I discovered later, he carried pencils, paper, and a small telescope, with which he indulged his interest in astronomy.

When I recovered from the first shock of seeing Lovecraft, generally, I was awed by his eyes—the most piercing, limpid brown eyes I had ever seen—or have ever seen since. Etched in the unforgettable picture of this great master were the protruding lower jaw and strange pallor, like old ivory or mummy skin. His brown hair was thinning. But despite

all this I recognized something knightly in his bow when he shook my hand with the gentleness of a shy child. Then he spoke and I was not only unprepared but shaken irreparably by the peculiar sound of his thin, high-pitched voice.

I found Lovecraft diffident but very gallant, with a gallantry of an era we only read about in mid-Victorian literature. In our conversation we discussed among things my short novel, *The Mound*—the outgrowth of another tale told by the Comptons from their recollections of two old Indians living near Binger, Oklahoma—and my stories, *The Curse of Yig* and *Medusa's Coil,* which I had picked up as an idea from a Negress who did some housecleaning for me and expanded into a story similar in treatment to my earlier horror tale. I mentioned to Lovecraft that *The Curse of Yig* had been returned with a one-line comment: "Snakes! No editor with sense would buy such a story!"

"Send it to *Weird Tales,*" Lovecraft suggested, undaunted. "Surely Farnsworth Wright will buy it. It's an excellent story despite such criticism."

In the ensuing conversation we took up the subject of *Medusa's Coil.* It was decided that I should continue working on that under Lovecraft's direction. "However," he said, "I would like Belknap to work with you on your new story *The Mound.* He may have something fresher and more interesting to offer. I'm growing a little nervous and find that I tire easily." He smiled. "Grandpa's getting a little doddering, perhaps." He was then only thirty-five.

At Lovecraft's gentle insistence, I left *The Mound* with Frank Belknap Long, and it was Long who advised and worked with me on that short novel. Lovecraft's instructions were negligible; he merely advised both Belknap and myself when we felt we were not following his guidance. Yet the short novel has the same Lovecraftian mood and flavor as the other horror stories, because Belknap himself had long been a protégé of Lovecraft, and had himself absorbed much of the Lovecraft manner in tales of the macabre.

These three macabre stories were all based on actual happenings and so intricately woven into the lives of people I had met that I seemed unable to disengage them from reality and found it difficult, in those

formative years, to separate the tales from the living people. In each story I used the actual names and localities where the nucleus of the stories happened.

Conversation turned again to *The Curse of Yig.* "I'll send it to Farnsworth Wright myself," Lovecraft offered. "We'll see what he has to say about it." For a moment he regarded me with those penetrating brown eyes. "Why don't you go see Wright when you pass through Chicago?" he suggested. "I'll send the manuscript on ahead and you can discuss it with him."

During all this time, I was fascinated by Lovecraft's gaunt figure in the black suit and his piercing eyes, but the memory of his long hands will remain with me after all other characteristics have faded. They were pale, long, artistic hands that never moved to lend emphasis to his words, to drive home a point, as mine were constantly doing, or as Belknap's were moving to and from his pipe, to his matches, to the worn tobacco pouch. Those ivory-hued hands lay like long, sculptured pieces of wax, across his thin knees while we talked—and I don't believe he moved them once during those all too short hours except to handle his cup and cinnamon toast and to touch my hand in meeting me and bidding me goodbye. And, yes, there was the black tie, startling as crepe, against his pale jutting chin.

Soon after Mrs. Long had served us lunch, the three of us parted, and I went on my way filled with gratitude and admiration for both my teachers and friends. Both Belknap and Lovecraft were erudite men of integrity, always conscientious and unselfish, willing to do everything possible to further my search for knowledge and send me on my way as a writer. On my way from New York it was arranged that I was to meet another member of the legendary Lovecraft cult—Farnsworth Wright, editor of *Weird Tales,* who printed more Lovecraft stories than any other editor.

I met Wright on my stopover in Chicago and was surprised again by the sight of such a physical wreck. From him I learned that he had for years suffered from Parkinson's Disease, and was fighting valiantly to maintain his precarious health, though perhaps he understood that in the end he must succumb to the disease, as he did some years later in

New York. At the time of our meeting, he could still punch out a good letter on the typewriter with two fingers and sign letters legibly with a pen. Before his death, however, he was signing letters with only a pitiful attempt at one initial.

During lunch at Jacques', our conversation naturally turned to Lovecraft and his fantastic story themes, especially those of the Cthulhu Mythos, which were based on a curious pantheon of Gods and Elder Beings with a marked basic similarity to the Christian Genesis story of the struggle between good and evil. At this time, the vogue for fantasy was just beginning to grow, and neither of us then realized that the fantasies of Lovecraft were soon to become minor classics, and that the story themes and concepts of other writers in the science-fiction field were to become the realities of tomorrow. Wright had not yet come to a decision about *The Curse of Yig,* but at least he was not prepared to reject the story, and that was a hopeful note.

Four months later Wright accepted *The Curse of Yig,* at forty-five dollars. More months elapsed. Then the tale was published in *Weird Tales.* Another long wait. At last a check came. I endorsed it below some fine print and cashed it. Neither Lovecraft nor anyone else had ever warned me against fine print that assigned all rights to a magazine. These rights in the case of *The Curse of Yig* had some value, for the story was subsequently reprinted without payment to me until rights to it were released.

In critical accounts of Lovecraft's work, some mention is usually made of the help he gave me on this story, and he deserves credit for its success. But the years of hard work, discouragement, and perseverance are dramatically bound up in these three tales. Later I sold *Medusa's Coil* to *Weird Tales* for a better sum: one hundred twenty dollars. However, I stipulated that half of this sum should be paid to Lovecraft's aunt, Annie E. P. Gamwell, since, in the interval, Lovecraft had died, and she was without funds.

Lovecraft's death took place in March, 1937, when he was but forty-seven. I had not only lost a teacher but a true friend, one without parallel in either erudition, sincerity or integrity. I had learned much from him. On the credit side, he had made me word-conscious. I had learned

from him fundamental principles of writing technique and the appreciation of literature. I had learned to capture the fantasy of the supernatural with an almost journalistic ease. I had had a good, steadying hand. But had he pushed me in the direction that was best for me?

I turned away from writing weird stories and resumed writing fiction and feature articles and finally wrote an historical series for a newspaper which ran for a year and could still be running by request. For financial reasons and without Lovecraft's knowledge I began to sell to the confession and pulp magazines. Editors encouraged me and markets opened up. I had wanted to write to sell and now I was doing it. The point is that I was selling the sort of story that Lovecraft frowned upon, and making money.

Lovecraft's tutorial attitude was that of the master toward his protégé. Perhaps it could not have been otherwise. He either had no conception of a pupil's own direction and aims or he was not sympathetic to them, for he tried to direct his pupils into lines of development similar to his own. He lacked the catholicity of taste that the best teachers of writing must have. There is, for example, nothing wrong in writing confession or love stories if one knows what one is about and does his best.

But in this rather specialized field, undoubtedly Lovecraft's own attitudes about sex and love (capably discussed in *H. P. L.: A Memoir,* by August Derleth) got in his way when he revised the work of his pupils. These were experiences not entirely within his ken. And in me, Lovecraft had a pupil who could have been encouraged to write for the contemporary love story magazines instead of led away from them, for, after his untimely death, I found the editors of confession and love pulp magazines to be ruthless yet most helpful critics, and managed to sell stories to them at far better prices than I was paid for those weird tales I had written under Lovecraft's tutelage.

Nevertheless, my debt to Lovecraft is great. I count myself fortunate that I was one of Lovecraft's epistolary friends and pupils. He helped me create a solid foundation which few may have the good fortune to possess, for he was a scholar and a gentleman who had a vivid appreciation of the best things in life and conveyed that appreciation to all those, pupils and friends, with whom he corresponded. Above all else, he was what Vincent Starrett said of him, "first and last a literary cove."

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About: *H. P. L.:* A Memoir, by August Derleth (Ben Abramson, 1945). • See also: *Marginalia, Beyond the Wall of Sleep, Something About Cats and Other Pieces,* and *The Arkham Sampler,* Volumes One (1948) and Two (1949).